

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SAJ-01 IO-10 ACDA-05 CIAE-00 DODE-00

PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01

SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 EB-07 COME-00 TRSE-00 OMB-01

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3041

INFO AMEMBASSY BERLIN

USMISSION USBERLIN

AMCONSUL BREMEN

AMCONSUL DUSSELDORF

AMCONSUL FRANKFURT

AMCONSUL HAMBURG

AMCONSUL MUNICH

AMCONSUL STUTTGART

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, PGOV, GW

SUBJECT: BUNDESTAG DEBATE PITS KOHL AGAINST SCHMIDT

REF: BONN 14831, MUNICH 1996

BEGIN SUMMARY: THE BUNDESTAG DEBATE SEPT. 17-18 ON THE GOVERNMENT'S BUDGET PROPOSALS DID NOT PROVIDE VERY MUCH NEW AS FAR AS ECONOMIC INITIATIVES WERE CONCERNED. THE DEBATE, HOWEVER, DID PROVIDE A STAGE FOR THE IMPORTANT POLITICAL FIGURES IN THE FRG TO STAKE OUT THEIR POSITIONS FOR THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN. CDU/CSU CHANCELLOR CANDIDATE HELMUT KOHL (APPEARING AS A GUEST BEFORE THE BUNDESTAG) PERFORMED SURPRISINGLY WELL IN HIS FIRST MAN-ON-MAN CONFRONTATION WITH CHANCELLOR HELMUT SCHMIDT IN
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THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN. END SUMMARY

1. THE TWO-DAY BUNDESTAG DEBATE ON THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC MEASURES DID NOT PROVIDE ANY STARTLING NEW PROPOSALS. BOTH SIDES REHASHED THEIR PREVIOUSLY STATED POSITIONS. THE GOVERNMENT MAINTAINED THAT WEST GERMAN'S ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES WERE A RESULT OF THE WORLD-WIDE ECONOMIC RECESSION. THE OPPOSITION CLAIMED THAT THE GOVERNMENT'S MISMANAGEMENT OF THE ECONOMY WAS THE PRIMARY CAUSE AND ACCUSED THE SOCIAL-LIBERAL COALITION OF AN UNWILLINGNESS TO FACE UP TO THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR TAKING THE NECESSARY, ALBEIT UNPOPULAR, SAVING MEASURES. SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LIBERAL SPEAKERS REITERATED THE CHARGES THAT THE OPPOSITION WAS OBSTRUCTIONIST AND HAD NO CONCRETE SOLUTIONS TO OFFER.

2. THE BUNDESTAG DEBATE DID, HOWEVER, PROVIDE A STAGE FOR THE KEY ACTORS TO STAKE OUT THEIR POSITIONS FOR NEXT YEAR'S ELECTION. THE DRAMA WAS HEIGHTENED BY THE APPEARANCE OF HELMUT KOHL, WHO, AS MINISTER PRESIDENT OF RHINELAND-PALATINATE, WAS INVITED BY THE BUNDESTAG TO SPEAK. THIS PROVIDED AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE GERMAN PUBLIC TO WITNESS THE TWO CANDIDATES FOR THE CHANCELLORSHIP IN A HEAD-ON-HEAD DEBATE ABOUT GOVERNMENT POLICIES. THE ONLY MAJOR FRG POLITICAL FIGURE ABSENT FROM THE DEBATE WAS FRANZ JOSEF STRAUSS WHO WAS IN PEKING. STRAUSS, HOWEVER, HAD MADE HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEBATE AT LAST WEEKEND'S CSU CONVENTION (MUNICH 1996).

3. HELMUT KOHL'S PERFORMANCE IN THE BUNDESTAG DEBATE RECEIVED HIGH MARKS FROM MOST OBSERVERS. EVEN ADVISORS TO THE CHANCELLOR ADMIT THAT KOHL'S RELATIVELY NON-POLEMIC, SERIOUS APPROACH WAS EFFECTIVE AND WAS MORE POLITICALLY DANGEROUS THAN A PARTISAN ATTACK WOULD HAVE BEEN. THIS IS OF PARTICULAR INTEREST BECAUSE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM HOLDS THAT IN A FACE TO FACE DEBATE KOHL WOULD NOT STAND A CHANCE AGAINST HELMUT SCHMIDT, ESPECIALLY ON ECONOMIC DEBATE.

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4. SCHMIDT'S DELIVERY OF THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM AND HIS PARTICIPATION IN THE DEBATE WERE SOMEWHAT MORE AGGRESSIVE THAN USUAL. THIS REFLECTS A MIXTURE OF SCHMIDT'S PERSONAL PIQUE WITH THE OPPOSITION AND THE EXIGENCIES OF THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN.

5. CDU/CSU FRAKTION LEADER KARL CARSTENS DELIVERED A HIGHLY POLEMICAL SPEECH. AT ONE POINT HE CALLED FOR SCHMIDT'S RESIGNATION AS CHANCELLOR BECAUSE SCHMIDT'S GOVERNMENT HAD MISLED THE COUNTRY. WHILE CARSTENS DOES NOT HAVE A REPUTATION AS A FIERY ORATOR, HIS PERFORMANCE AT THE CSU PARTEITAG IN MUNICH AND IN THE BUNDESTAG DEBATE INDICATE THAT HE HAS BEEN UNDERRATED AS A PARTISAN

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IN-FIGHTER.

6. THE SPEECHES OF SUCH IMPORTANT ECONOMIC MOVERS AND SHAKERS AS FINANCE MINISTER APEL, ECONOMICS MINISTER FRIDERICH'S AND FDP ECONOMICS SPOKESMAN GRAF LAMBSDORFF WERE OVERSHADOWED BY THE SCHMIDT-KOHL DEBATE (E.G., ONE OF FDP LEADER GENSCHER'S ADVISORS TOLD AN EMBASSY OFFICER THAT HE FELT THE FDP PERFORMANCE HAD BEEN VERY WEAK). WHILE IT IS MUCH TOO SOON TO DECIDE IF, IN FACT, HELMUT KOHL IS CAPABLE OF SUCCESSFULLY TAKING ON CHANCELLOR

SCHMIDT IN PUBLIC DEBATE, THE FACT REMAINS THAT HIS
PERFORMANCE IN THE BUNDESTAG HAS CAUSED SOME RETHINKING
ON BOTH SIDES.
HILLENBRAND

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